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MAURICE HEWLETT

It is the fashion of the day—as when was it not the fashion?—to be a bit pessimistic about the trend of current literature, to wag one's head and hint at decadence, to hark back sorrowfully to the high estate from which we have fallen. And yet it seems to me that on the whole our literary taste has improved rather than deteriorated. Perhaps, as someone has suggested, it has undergone a levelling down rather than a levelling up, with the result that we have achieved a common mean of mediocrity; but, be that as it may, I believe I am safe in saying that the general reading public is more exacting in its demands than it was, say fifty years ago. As an example I may cite the popularity of Maurice Hewlett. Now, one may at times have occasion to cavil at certain mannerisms of Mr. Hewlett, certain tendencies toward ornateness or overwording, yet one must at the same time acknowledge that his work is plainly that of a trained scholar and an acute thinker; and that his wealth of imagination, his excellent delineation of character, and, most important of all, his striking peculiarities of diction are all subjects well worthy of study.

Maurice Hewlett published his first book—*Earthworks Out of Tuscany*—in 1895. He was at that time thirty-four years of age, and, if one may judge by the character and the rapid sequence of his publications, it would seem that the earlier years of his life had been spent in bringing together the great mass of material necessary for the historical and quasi-historical novels in which he excels, and in a wide reading of mediæval Latin and Italian, which, by the way, has strongly influenced his style and more particularly his structure. An evidence of the thoroughness of Mr. Hewlett's preliminary training is the remarkable evenness of his work. *Earthworks Out of Tuscany* (an extremely clever collection of essays) was followed a year later by *The Masks of Dead Florentines*, and in 1897 by *Songs and Meditations*. But it was not until 1898, when *The Forest Lovers* was published, that Hewlett became widely known. Since that time he has published one, and in

several instances two, books each year. Beyond a doubt his two historical novels, *Richard Yea and Nay* and *The Queen's Quair*, show the greatest thought and the most penetrating character study; at the same time it seems equally certain that *The Forest Lovers* and *The Song of Renny*—either because they are cast in their author's favorite period, the mediæval, or because they tell of everybody's favorite country, No-man's-land,—are the most popular of his works. The fact that Mr. Hewlett is so analytic, so deliberate a stylist, so loving a dweller on minutiae, makes his shorter stories—*Little Novels of Italy* and *The Spanish Jade*—his most artistic work. Indeed, from the point of view of pure art it would be as unfitting for him to write a long story as it would have been for Meissonier to cover a large canvas with the intricate and delicately worked out detail for which he is so famous. And yet, as I have said before, the workmanship of all Maurice Hewlett's writing is marvelously even. It is interesting to compare *The Forest Lovers* (published in 1898) with *The Song of Renny* (published in 1911) and to observe that, while the latter book shows practically no growth either in style or invention, it, on the other hand, shows positively no decline. Again, in Hewlett's novels of modern English life—notably *The Half-Way House* and *Rest Harrow*—where we miss the sympathy and the virility of the mediæval stories, we find the same polished style, the same careful articulation, the same punctilious regard of technique; and this, it seems to me, is worthy of note in an author who has published nearly twenty novels in seventeen years.

To find Maurice Hewlett's place in literature is a matter of the utmost difficulty. A stylist of the most decided type, he is yet removed by the width of the poles from our great American stylist, Henry James; a realist of the most decided type, he is still, by reason of one peculiarity, unakin to other realists. Hewlett never moralizes. He presents to his readers, with an almost epic absence of comment, situations and relations of the most startling character—situations and relations that would for the average realist form the nucleus of long and gusty discourses. In technique Mr. Hewlett comes closer, perhaps, to Robert Louis Stevenson than to any other modern novelist. In both we find

an avoidance of the deliberately balanced sentence, though I might say that this is much more noticeable in Hewlett than in Stevenson. In both, too, we find frequent personification, and remarkably free use of the forced epithet, the epithet which carries in its wake a train of unusual connotations. For example, in *The Forest Lovers* Hewlett describes Galor's dying groan as a 'wet groan', and the one epithet brings before us the quick gush of warm blood from a severed jugular vein and the final groan that ends in a sputtering choke. So Stevenson speaks of a 'shattering noise', a 'writhen smile', a 'ragged peal'. But apart from these points of technique, Stevenson and Hewlett are widely dissimilar. The art which conceals art, the art which gives to Stevenson's most carefully elaborated passages an air of ingenuous simplicity, is lacking in Hewlett. He is primarily conscious. He builds with deft and deliberate hand each sentence, he draws from his large and highly colored vocabulary precisely the right word for the right place; and we follow each turn of the well-ordered machinery. Notwithstanding this deliberateness, however, or perhaps because of it, it seems futile to try to place Hewlett among the merely popular writers. Popular his novels undoubtedly are—possibly, if one may judge by the number of times they are reprinted, even among the 'ten best sellers',—and yet there is that in them which leads one to hope—however much one may hesitate to prophesy—that they may have a longer life than is usually vouchsafed the favorites of that fickle jade, popularity. And so our author stands, head and shoulders above the rank and file, within touching distance of the really great, in a somewhat isolated position. And so, perhaps, we had best leave him, for, as I said before, it is no easy matter to catch, label, and set in his proper niche this free-lance of literature.

The richness of Hewlett's invention is, I believe, the real reason of his popularity. In all his novels—the historical, those in which merely the background is historical, and the modern—the movement sweeps toward the climax with a swing and a rush that is irresistible. The core about which each one of these stories centres is love. War and politics, religion and intrigue—subordinate motives all—serve merely as embroidery

to embellish the main theme, which rings out clear and strong throughout the entire composition. In *Richard Yea and Nay* it is the love of Richard and Jehane Saint-Pol; in *The Forest Lovers* it is the love of Prosper le Gai and Isoult la Desirous; in *The Song of Renny* it is the love of Launceilhot and Mabilla; and so through the whole list of novels. But the incident in each of these stories is so original, so daring in conception, so ingeniously carried out, so vividly told, that the most carping reader could hardly complain of monotony. There is one phase of Hewlett's invention that is curiously striking, curiously interesting, when one considers the atmosphere in which he was reared, and that is what would appear to be a savage reversion from the pruderies of his period to an almost primitive disregard of human life: Nowhere in the course of my reading have I ever come across an author who describes a killing with such fine detail and such apparent zest as does Hewlett. He seems to care little for battles or engagements in which many men come together; his special *métier* is the man-to-man combat, his favorite weapon the knife. Fire-arms he eschews entirely, and he indulges in a stoning or a strangling only as a concession to the popular demand for variety. The killing of Galors by Prosper le Gai, the stabbing of Broadfoot Moll by Firmin, Manuela's murder of her lover, the Golden Venetian's horrible fight in *The Judgment of Borso*, are but a few examples. In *The Forest Lovers* there is an interesting Homeric echo. The scene where Prosper le Gai returns to the house of the Lady Isabel and punishes the offending servants is an almost exact parallel to the return of Odysseus. And, as I have said, these bloody scenes are described with a certain gusto and relish, a certain loving attention to details. Every step to the climax is carefully worked out—the preparation, the meeting, the thrust and parry, the whiz of the knife through human flesh, the quick rush of blood, the thud of the falling victim. And all this without a single comment as to the morality or the immorality of the act. We are not told that the author considers it a bit unusual for a lady to stab her lover to the heart as he is in the act of embracing her, or that the deed will in all probability cause her some sleepless nights, or that it

may possibly tend to undermine her general character. This withdrawal of the personality of the author, together with the swiftness of action and fertility of invention, give to Hewlett's novels a piquancy and a savor that atone to a great extent for the sameness of his *dramatis personæ*.

For Hewlett presents in his books, it must be confessed, an astonishingly small number of characters. Cleverly drawn they are and interesting, but when we know a few, we know them all. And, strangely enough, this similarity holds good for their personal appearance as well as for their mental and moral characteristics. To know Jehane Saint-Pol is to know Manuela, the Spanish Jade; Vanna, the Madonna of the Peach-Tree; Ippolita in the Hills; Molly, the Countess of Nonna. Golden women all, and tall, with eyes that vary only from the green of the seas to the gray of the skies; women of indifferent intellect, but possessed of a vast capacity for loving and a singleness of purpose that is almost animal in its intensity. A little different, though perhaps more outwardly than inwardly, is the Isoult la Desirous type, under which fall Sabine, who was Renny of Cold-scaur, and Mabilla her cousin, Mary Germain of *The Half-Way House*; Hermia of *The Stopping Lady*, and Bellaroba of *The Judgment of Borso*. These are brunette women, gentler perhaps and more clinging, but like their tawny sisters in that they are stronger in the heart than in the head; indeed, so parallel are they in many ways that the two types might almost be considered as one. A third and more distinct type, which serves as a foil for the other two, completes the muster of Hewlett's female characters. This is the conventional adventuress—Maulfrey of *The Forest Lovers*, Blanchmains of *The Song of Renny*, and Donna Olimpia, the Golden Venetian, for example. These women are akin to the heroines in the fierceness and strength of their affections, for Hewlett makes love the keynote of each of his characters—good or bad—just as he makes love the *motif* of each of his stories.

I believe I am safe in saying that all Hewlett's women are preëminently beautiful; but, while he has three types of women, he has only two types of beauty, and there are certain physical characteristics which he uses over and over again. Of these

perhaps the most marked are eyes of shifting color and a conspicuously short upper lip. For instance, he says of Jehane Saint-Pol: "The iris of her eyes was wet grey, but ringed with black and shot with yellow, giving them the effect of hot green;" and she had "an upper lip with the sulky curve." Again he says of Isoult la Desirous: "She had eyes which, really grey, had a look of black as the pupil swam over the iris." Ippolita's eyes are blue, "the colour of the Adriatic when a fleeting cloud spreads a curtain of hyacinth over the sheeted turquoise bed." Maulfrey is described as having a mouth "rather long and turned up at the corners, lips rich and crimson, of which, however, the upper was short to a fault and so curled back as to give her a pettish or fretful look." And the lovely Lady Mabilla is pictured with "dark-blue eyes (which changed with her moods)", and "an upper lip too short for kindness."

Hewlett's men are more interesting than his women, more diverse, less apt to run into set categories. They are all—be they warrior, statesman, or priest—essentially primal men, moved by the great primal passions—love, revenge, greed—and instinct with the great primal virtue—personal courage. They are a band of mighty fighters, and even the ranks of the villains (the Galors, the Pikpoyntz, the Estéhans), or the gay young troubadours (the Angiolettos, the Launceilhots, the Bertran de Borns) number no cravens. A further evidence of their primitiveness is the fact that they are absolutely unhumorous. They are all, men and women alike, solemn, intense people, with a lively appreciation of the importance of being in earnest. Indeed, one might read through the entire list of Hewlett's novels and never once laugh. Smile one might (a bit wryly, I venture to say) at the author's keen appreciation of the 'quirks of joy and sorrow', at his grim sense of the irony of fate; but laugh—never.

Before leaving the subject of Hewlett as a delineator of character, it is but fair to pay a tribute to his remarkably clever and interesting analyses of the characters of Richard Cœur de Lion in *Richard Yea and Nay*, and of Mary Queen of Scots in *The Queen's Quair*. To take these two people, perhaps the most romantic and the most maligned in English history,

to separate in some degree fact from fancy, to study their genealogies and to consider the part that heredity might have played in their make-up, to thresh out the great mass of literature bearing on them and on their periods, and from the whole to evolve a man of brawn and muscle and a woman of instincts and impulses, was no mean task. But it is a task in which Hewlett has been eminently successful, and the fact that we catch echoes, more especially of Richard, in a number of the author's other novels, detracts in nowise from this success.

But in considering Maurice Hewlett's work, probably the most interesting feature and the one most worthy of notice is his diction. His vocabulary is unusually large, unusually vivid, unusually fresh. He draws very little on biblical or Shakespearean English, and occasionally, in striving to avoid the trite and commonplace, his effects become strained, as when he speaks of a man 'gluttonous of blood'. He is singularly dependent on color in his descriptions both of animate and inanimate things. For instance, he speaks of a 'copper-brown haze', a 'patch of white-wash splodged on a blue field', 'the jade-green Sâr', 'under a coffer-lid of blue it lies, greener than an emerald', 'leaving the sky a lake of burnt yellow', 'blue mist of the hyacinth', 'scarlet clouds', 'the pink flush on the almonds'. I might carry on this list almost indefinitely, for in reading any chapter in any one of Hewlett's books we cannot fail to be struck by this riot of color. Adjectives he uses very freely, often, as I have said before, forcing their connotation; and this is true, though in a less degree, of his use of verbs. Thus in *The Madonna of the Peach-Tree* we read: "The mob *dizzied* about her like a cloud of wasps." A marked predilection for certain epithets is another peculiarity noticeable in Hewlett. Take, for instance, the word 'wet'. We find the '*wet* brilliancy of the stars', a '*wet* groan', a '*wet* cough', 'the iris of her eyes was a *wet* grey', the 'fresh, *wet* air', the '*wet* dawn', to cite but a few examples. The Homeric stock epithet, too, occurs occasionally, as 'winged death' in *The Forest Lovers*. The general effect of Hewlett's word-painting is an almost fierce vividness, a wind-swept, sun-kissed impression, which is not out

of place, when we consider that the major parts of his stories are set in the out-of-doors.

The tendency, most marked in his earliest and latest successes (*The Forest Lovers* and *Renny of Coldscaur*), to overflow the borders of prose into the realm of poetry, is, I believe, the direct result of Mr. Hewlett's wide reading of the literature of the later Renaissance—the period of over-decoration and decadence in all the plastic arts. In his use of figures this tendency is even more decided than in his use of the epithet. Here he steps boldly into the domain of poetry and assumes all the rights and all the privileges of the poet. The effect is undoubtedly picturesque, but it is not good prose. As for example, "From the spoils of the feast Savagery reared its clotted head", "Like a Norn reading fate in the starred web of the night", "Great banners wagged and rocked like osiers in flood-water". It is characteristic of Hewlett's *penchant* for high lights and sharp contrasts that he should throw into the midst of his most poetical passages (poetical at times in metre as well as in wording) an expression almost brutally commonplace; as "Great banners *wagged*". Other examples of this are "a patch of white-wash *splodged* on a blue field", and "His idyll of the tanned gipsy with her glancing eyes and warm lips had been *spattered* out with a brushful of blood". In fairness it should be said, however, that these abuses are not universal, and that Hewlett is at times singularly happy in his choice of simile—when, for instance, he speaks of "mist, soft and lapping as fleece", of Mabilla's hair, which "lay in one heavy roll, lustrous as a ship's cable new hauled from the tideway", of the bent peach-trees like "blown candle-flames," of Richard throwing out his archers like "water-spray".

In conclusion, some account should be taken of the criticism that is most commonly made in connection with our author's stories, and that is the question of morals. Maurice Hewlett is undoubtedly frank, and in his novels certain subjects are mentioned in passing (rarely discussed, mind you) that are taboo in modern society. But it must be remembered that in the main he is writing of a people and of a time in which the standard of morals differed widely from our own, and in which

even polite conversation had more latitude. In his stories of modern English life the language is tempered to suit the times, but in both his mediæval and modern stories there is this virtue in Hewlett's handling of unpleasant subjects—he grasps the matter firmly, states it without circumlocution, leaves nothing to the imagination. From the covered drain rise noxious gases; from the discreetly veiled allusion spring divers surmises born of the reader's experience or lack of experience. So a bald statement of fact, when it is necessary, leaves far less after-effect than does the delicate skirting of the subject, finger on lip and eyes averted, to which we have grown accustomed. And, as I find Homeric echoes in Hewlett's phraseology and in his invention, so I find something almost Homeric in his magnificent disregard of convention.

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